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Memories of a Handshake across the Elbe River Remain 63 Years Later

By Jeffrey Thau

American and Russian troops meet at the Elbe in 1945.
Allan Jackson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Sixty-three years ago the fielded forces of World War II in Europe met as a coalition force for the first time near Torgau, Germany. In the famous picture that flashed across the AP at the time, soldiers from the 69th Infantry Division were shown meeting the Russian Army, 58th Guards Division, on the destroyed bridge over the Elbe River in Germany. One of the Russian soldiers in the photo, Charles Thau, a Jew from Poland, (center, facing camera) immigrated to the U.S. and raised a family, including a son, Jeff, who now resides in Dayton Ohio (and is the vice commander of Dayton JWV Post 587). Since his father passed away, the City of Torgau, Germany, in honor of his father's contribution in helping to liberate Germany from the Nazi regime, invited Jeff to Torgau and sponsored his attendance at ceremonies celebrating the 63rd anniversary of "East Meets West." This story is a legacy of survival, unknown heroes, a journey down life's path in what is a small world, and heartfelt gratitude that stretches across countries, decades and generations today.

Charles Thau's epic survival story originated in an area today known as Ukraine-Polish Region as defined by the 1941 Hitler-Stalin pact. As the Nazi war machine came through the region and murdered an untold number of Jews, including Charles Thau's immediate family in the village of Zaplotov, the teenage Thau managed to escape by living in the wooded region near the Carpathian Mountains. Conducting underground sabotage and survival actions against the Nazis and their collaborators, Thau was eventually detained by the Russian Army, 58th Guards Division, and conscripted into their ranks, given his ability to speak multiple languages, including Russian, Polish, and German. This allowed him to assist as a translator for the advanced leading Russian forces as they made their way into Germany.

On April 25, 1945, as they approached Torgau, resistance was encountered from the retreating German Army (Wehrmacht) just east of the Elbe River. From the West the American 69th Infantry Division also approached Torgau. The situation culminated in the two fielded forces coming face-to-face in an atmosphere that, albeit initially uncertain, became celebratory once they recognized each other as friendly forces. The Americans and Russians exchanged vodka and chocolate, danced, and shook hands in a reenacted photo (above) by Allan Jackson which recorded the historic encounter the following day, and the re-enactment was recognized as an award winning photograph from the Second World War.

Jeff Thau, son of one of the participants in the 1945 photo, returns to Torgau, Germany, to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the Handshake.

Over time names of the photographed individuals emerged as the City of Torgau and the commemorative military organizations (be they Russian or American) would annually celebrate this event on site. On the left are Americans Pfc Metzger and Philpott and Pvt Summers who later participated in annual celebrations at the Elbe River. At the time, the Russians could not be identified despite attempts by central Russian newspapers for a call for them to come forward. At the 10-year anniver-

Continued on page 25

Memories of a Handshake

Continued from page 9

sary of the historic East-meets-West link-up in 1955, the AP photo appeared in a Milwaukee Wisconsin, newspaper, and one of the Russian soldiers (center facing camera) was identified as Charles Thau who immigrated to the U.S. after the war to eventually own two successful automobile repair garages. Furthermore, in a strange twist characterizing life's journey and how small the world really is, after the war, Pvt Philpott lived for a few years in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, just blocks away from Charles Thau, the previously unidentified Russian solider with whom he shared vodka, chocolate, and a handshake on the Elbe bridge.

All the above was unknown to the principals of either the City of Torgau or each of the commemorative military organizations until the age of the Internet when the son of Charles Thau, Jeffrey Thau, helped connect the legacy dots for the commemorative organizations. Unfortunately, Lt Charles Thau, the previously unknown Russian soldier, passed away before the connections were made and the celebrants were made aware of his identity. However, this did not stop the Mayor of Torgau, Ms Andrea Staude, from inviting Jeffrey Thau to attend the 63rd anniversary of the event in April to represent his father.

For what today is known as Elbe Day, Torgau sponsored Jeff's attendance and honored him as a representative of his father at this year's commemoration of the 1945 WWII link-up event between the Americans and the Russian forces. Activities included a formal dedication at the Elbe River site, a solemn wreath laying by various ambassadors and dignitaries from Russia, the United States, and Germany, as well as the release of dozens of doves symbolizing continued enduring peace and honoring all the civilians and victims who lost their lives. The city of Torgau also sponsored a pleasure boat cruise down the Elbe River past the exact site where 63 years earlier the historic link-up of military forces occurred.

As the mayor of Torgau said in her remarks, "Time marches on, the memory of this time remains and it will continue to be with us through the daughters and sons of the Veterans from East and West.

[Jeffrey Thau, a retired US Air Force Colonel is Vice Commander of Dayton Post 587 of the JWV.]